

## ON THE ABSENCE OF 'FRAGRANT FILM': Changing Images of the Author in Indonesia

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### Abstract

*A more varied and plural image of 'the author' has emerged during the past decade, brought about by subsequent literary trends including Islamic women's writing and 'teen-lit' written by and for teenagers. 'sastra wangi' (fragrant literature) was a popular media label used to describe the controversial work of young female authors writing during the early 'reformasi' period. One decade on, we are seeing film adaptations of such work, none of which have provoked a comparable level of furore. The absence of any kind of 'fragrant film' discourse denigrating the femininity of the narratives reveals a shift in public discourse around authorship in contemporary Indonesia. This article uses close textual readings, media discourse analysis and ethnographic audience research to examine the relationship between such trends, and the ways in which young Indonesians engage with popular narratives.*

*[Munculnya penulis-penulis muda pada beberapa dekade terakhir di Indonesia dengan beragam citra masing-masing telah mendorong lahirnya tren baru dalam dunia sastra, termasuk tulisan-tulisan muslimah dan sastra remaja yang ditulis oleh dan untuk remaja. Tren tersebut salah satunya memunculkan apa yang kemudian populer dengan istilah 'sastra wangi', istilah yang digunakan untuk menyebut karya-karya sastra yang memicu kontroversi dan ditulis oleh penulis perempuan pada masa awal era reformasi. Pada satu dekade berikutnya, beberapa karya sastra tersebut diadaptasi dalam bentuk film. Namun demikian, film yang diproduksi tidak memicu kontroversi, tidak seperti halnya ketika karya sastra itu pertama kali ditulis. Absennya*

*perdebatan dan kecaman terhadap ‘film wangi’ mengindikasikan pergeseran dalam perdebatan publik mengenai ‘kepengarangan’ di Indonesia kontemporer. Artikel ini didasarkan pada pembacaan tekstual, analisis wacana media, dan riset audien secara etnografis untuk mengungkap hubungan antara tren-tren sastra di atas dan bagaimana sikap anak muda Indonesia terhadap sastra-sastra populer tersebut.]*

**Keywords:** literature, film, women Islam, teen-lit, popular culture

**DOI:** 10.14421/ajis.2013.512.365-387

## A. Introduction

Indonesia’s post-Suharto *reformasi* period<sup>1</sup> saw a significant boom in literature written by young female authors, tackling topics and themes previously deemed taboo. Labelled by supporters and critics alike as *sastra wangi* (lit. ‘fragrant literature’), these narratives were on the one hand widely hailed as a step towards women’s emancipation from stereotypical gender roles, and on the other hand accused of flooding the market with vulgar pornographic content. One decade on, the novels of one particular author of this generation, Dewi Lestari, have achieved huge success on the big screen. With four highly popular film adaptations released during the 2012-2013 period, it seems that ‘fragrant film’ is the flavour of the moment in Indonesia. Yet in contrast to the critical furore surrounding ‘fragrant literature’, there has been barely a ripple of controversy surrounding these film versions. Prompted by this marked change in public discourse, this paper offers a comparative review of trends in Indonesian women’s writing over the past decade,

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<sup>1</sup>Since the fall of Suharto’s ‘New Order’ regime in May 1998, huge changes have taken place in the Indonesian public sphere, both in terms of the political system, and the content, production, distribution, exhibition, and discourse of Indonesian media, including print journalism, television, cinema, literature and so on. During the decade of *Reformasi* directly following the regime’s collapse, a whole range of norms, rules, regulations, and authorities were contested and re-negotiated; Ariel Heryanto and Vedi R. Hadiz, “Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: A Comparative Southeast Asian Perspective,” *Critical Asian Studies* 37.2 (2005). Over a decade on, now that the dust of post-Suharto euphoria has well and truly settled, we can more clearly map the changes, continuities and emerging patterns in terms of new authorities, both formal and informal.

exploring lasting impacts, new developments, and audience reactions to the narratives of young female authors in Indonesia.

*Sastra wangi* was in many ways a derogatory media label that focused on the femininity of the authors, rather than the literary content of their work. However, the way that people talk about and conceptualise female authors in Indonesia has changed dramatically over the past decade, and the term *sastra wangi* has all but disappeared, with the emergence of more varied notions of what it means to be an author. One key aspect of these changes is that previously prevailing notions of a male-dominated literary scene have lost much of their credence. By tracking the ways in which public discourses surrounding Indonesian women writers have shifted during the past decade, we can begin to see patterns emerging in the media landscape of post-authoritarian Indonesia, where not just female voices, but also Islamic voices (through popular Islamic fiction) and younger voices (through ‘teen’ literature) are increasingly narrating stories that matter to them.

This paper is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of each literary text or film, but rather a window into the current conjunctural context in Indonesia, an attempt to explore the ways in which different narrative voices in post-authoritarian Indonesia have emerged, converged and diverged during the past decade. Once greeted as ground-breaking literature, but now relatively mainstream, to what extent did *sastra wangi* transform the Indonesian popular literary landscape? How is the phenomenon related to other trends of the past decade, such as the growth of popular Islamic fiction and ‘teenlit’? In the process of answering such questions, I draw on media discourse analysis, close textual readings and also ethnographic fieldwork exploring how young Indonesians engage with and pass judgment on contemporary popular narratives. Ultimately, this paper reveals complex processes of change and continuity around gender politics and identity in contemporary Indonesia, as played out in popular narratives and public reception of such narratives.

This particular study comprises part of my broader doctoral project examining emerging trends in popular Indonesian narratives, focusing in particular on novel-to-film adaptations, and how notions of the traditional and the modern are imagined and negotiated through and around these

texts. Situated within an interdisciplinary cultural studies framework, my research project employs mixed methods, including ethnographic audience research, critical discourse analysis, and close textual readings. Media and popular culture are important sites for constructing and contesting identity in contemporary Indonesia, and ordinary people engage with popular discourses in complex ways; my own approach to these issues is influenced by the theories of popular culture put forward by John Fiske, Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, Norman Fairclough and, more specifically for the Indonesian context, Ariel Heryanto.<sup>2</sup>

With its emphasis on female narratives, this current paper takes a gender studies perspective, while also taking into account important intersections with other sites of power contestation including class, religion, politics and region. Methodologically, this article draws on my close readings of the novels and films, as well as discourse analysis of subsequent reactions and critical reception in the Indonesian media. I also make use of insights from my ethnographic fieldwork, which is based on more than one hundred interviews (both in-depth individual and focus group discussion style) with young Indonesian consumers in six prominent urban centres throughout the archipelago: Jakarta, Makassar, Padang, Yogyakarta, Manado and Banjarmasin. Respondents for this project were all between 18-26 years old, predominantly university educated, and were selected through a snowball sampling technique. Topics covered during interviews were broad and varied, relating to many different aspects of contemporary Indonesian popular culture. For this article, I mainly draw on the interview material related to female authors, and also to the way respondents engage with and pass judgement on popular narratives in general.

## **B. ‘Fragrant Literature’: History, Context, and Legacy**

‘*Satsra wangi*’ literally translates as ‘fragrant literature’ and is a broad term that appeared in the years following Suharto’s downfall in 1998, to

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<sup>2</sup>John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2010 [1989]). Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); Ariel Heryanto (ed.), *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008).

describe the emergence of a new generation of young female authors whose writing was characterised by explicit sexuality. Kick-starting this phenomenon was Ayu Utami's debut novel, *Saman*, which won first prize in the Jakarta Arts Council's prestigious novel-writing competition in 1998 and provoked instant controversy throughout Indonesia's literary and non-literary worlds.<sup>3</sup> Literary figures such as Sapardi Djoko Damono, Umar Kayam and Y.B Mangunwijaya expressed their admiration for its unique compositional technique and poetic, innovative language, as well as its critique of New Order human rights violations.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, *Saman* was also widely condemned for its portrayal of female sexuality, which was described variously as vulgar, offensive and attention-seeking.<sup>5</sup> Around the same time, Utami was followed by other prominent female authors including Fira Basuki, Dewi Lestari and Djenar Maesa Ayu. Although their works dealt with a range of complex issues, it was inevitably the issue of female sexuality that came to define them as a group.

To understand why the notion of female authors writing about female desire and non-normative sexualities (as well as issues of politics and social justice, which were previously only deemed appropriate for male writers), it is important to recall the New Order regime's strict control over public expression and also its hegemonic representations of women. Under Suharto's 30-year authoritarian rule (1966-1998), media makers were obliged to conform to state ideologies.<sup>6</sup> There were

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<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, I have written in more detail about Utami's work, particularly the often-overlooked mythological elements in her tales, and her use of aesthetic, narrative and thematic aspects of the Javanese *wayang* shadow puppetry tradition; Meg Downes, "Shadows on the Page: Javanese *Wayang* in Contemporary Indonesian Literature," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 46.1 (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Hatley, "New Directions in Indonesian Women's Writing? The Novel *Saman*," *Asian Studies Review*, 23.4 (1999).

<sup>5</sup> For example, noted poet Taufiq Ismail denounced the inclusion of *sastra wangi* into literature by renaming it *sastra syahwat* or "genital literature". For a feminist critique of Utami's work, arguing the way sex is portrayed in the novels actually disempowers women, see Katrin Bandel, "Heteronormalitas Dan Falosentrisme Ayu Utami," *Kompas*, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Virginia Matheson Hooker, *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993); Keith Foulcher, "The Construction of an Indonesian National Culture: Patterns of Hegemony and Resistance," in Arief Budiman (ed.), *State and Civil Society in Indonesia* (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990). These New Order state ideologies

only a handful of television and radio stations, the majority of which were government-controlled or owned by Suharto's associates. The film industry was tightly controlled by state interests, and produced mainly historical or developmental propaganda films.<sup>7</sup> In the literature scene, novelists tended to shroud any potentially controversial or critical messages in layers of absurdist playfulness and indirect wordplay.<sup>8</sup> Women's bodies in particular often served as a site of social control and an emblem of national identity. Barbara Hatley (2008) notes that in 1965 'a concocted, aggressively sexual image of the communist women's movement, *Gerwani*, served to demonise communism and justify the annihilation of its adherents' and that in contrast, 'the demure, decorous image of woman as wife and mother symbolised the social order that Suharto's New Order regime supposedly then restored to the nation'.<sup>9</sup> Julia Suryakusuma has written extensively on the New Order regime's '*Ibuisme Negara*' ('State Housewife-isation') which strongly reinforced normative gender roles across a variety of platforms.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore,

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included militarization, Java-centrism, patriarchy, a focus on development and modernity at the expense of individual rights and freedoms, and so on.

<sup>7</sup> Development films and documentaries aimed to influence and educate the Indonesian public, while historical films (such as *Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, an anti-communist film screened yearly on television) were imperative in the state project to mould collective memories and representations of history in society, and to define Indonesian core values. For more detail, see Karl G. Heider, *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991); Katinka van Heeren, *Contemporary Indonesian Film: Spirits of Reform and Ghosts from the Past* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tickell, "Subversion or Escapism? The Fantastic in Recent Indonesian Fiction," *Review of Indonesian and Malay Affairs*, 20.1 (1986); John H. McGlynn, "Silenced Voices, Muted Expressions: Indonesian Literature Today," *Manoa*, 12.1 (2000); David T. Hill, "Who's Left? Indonesian Literature in the Early 1980s," *Working Paper*, No. 33 (Clayton: Monash University, 1984); Marshall Clark, "Shadow Boxing: Indonesian Writers and the Ramayana in the New Order," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 72 (2001), Michael Bodden, "Seno Gumira Ajidarma and Fictional Resistance to an Authoritarian State in 1990s Indonesia," *Indonesia*, 68, October (1999).

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Hatley, *Javanese Performances on an Indonesian Stage: Contesting Culture, Embracing Change* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> See also Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Laurie J. Sears, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (London: Zed Press, 1994).

notions of the ideal Indonesian citizen became closely linked to extremely narrow gendered ideologies.<sup>11</sup> This resulted in a very constricted vision of heterosexual femininity and masculinity as a key foundation of society, and it is precisely this vision that the so-called '*sastra wangi*' authors challenged during the early post 1998 *reformasi* years.

It remains unclear exactly when the phrase '*sastra wangi*' began to be used to describe these authors, but during the early 2000s it was adopted widely by the mass media, both in Indonesia and abroad.<sup>12</sup> Many of the authors themselves objected to the categorisation as derogatory and disempowering. Ayu Utami has dismissed the phrase as 'meaningless' and 'sexist', and Djenar Maesa Ayu actively opposed the *sastra wangi* label, claiming 'I'm not fragrant. Neither are my works. I don't know how or why they categorized my work as "fragrant literature"'. Similarly, Dewi Lestari refused to be lumped in the *sastra wangi* group, arguing that the only similarity she shared with the other women writers from that particular generation was the fact that 'we're all young female writers producing work at the same time. But we choose different themes.'<sup>13</sup> Certainly, excessive focus on the attractiveness of the authors and the sexual content of their works frequently obscured both the political content of the narratives as well as their literary merit. In a particularly telling example of how female authors were perceived at the time, Ayu Utami was suspected of not writing *Saman* at all, but rather obtaining the help of well-known male literary figure Goenawan Mohammad, with whom she was rumoured to have had an affair. Another effect of the '*sastra wangi*' label is that by grouping all these authors under a single genre, the significant differences between their works were effectively obscured. Closer reading of the texts reveals that each author's concerns,

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<sup>11</sup> Marshall Clark, "Indonesian Cinema: Exploring Cultures of Masculinity, Censorship and Violence," in Ariel Heryanto, *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that the name arose in a short story by Bre Redana, which appeared in *Media Indonesia* on 29 September 2002, and included a main character named Dewi (Goddess) Sastrawangi; Pamela Allen, "Beyond Écriture Feminine: Desperately Seeking a New Literary Paradigm," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 41.2 (2007).

<sup>13</sup> All cited in Maggie Tiojakin, "Change, She Wrote," *Weekender, The Jakarta Post*, 29/03 2010.



approaches, and representations of women's bodies are quite different.<sup>14</sup>

Understandably, the *sastra wangi* trend garnered much academic attention amongst scholars of Indonesian literature during the *reformasi* period, with Barbara Hatley, Pamela Allen, Soe Tjen Marching, Michael Bodden, Tineke Hellwig, Katrin Bandel and others all publishing accounts of the phenomenon. A special issue of the journal RIMA was dedicated to *sastra wangi* in 2007.<sup>15</sup> However, at the time of my research in 2012-13, public discourse on female authors in Indonesia had changed dramatically. Most of my young respondents had never even heard the term *sastra wangi*, and a series of popular mainstream film adaptations of Dewi Lestari's novels did not raised a murmur of controversy. This prompted me to revisit both the hype and moral panic surrounding the so-called '*sastra wangi*' phenomena from an interdisciplinary perspective, and map the ways in which discourses about gender and sexuality in popular narratives have shifted since that time.

### C. Notions of the Female Narrator in Indonesia Today

One decade on, the term '*sastra wangi*' no longer appears in the Indonesian media, and is very rarely even recognised amongst my respondents. Yet many of the authors remain popular, and by tracking the ways in which discourses surrounding these authors have shifted during the past decade, we can trace changing power relations in and around popular narratives and identity in contemporary Indonesia.

The vast majority of my respondents do not appear particularly concerned with whether the authors they read are male or female, stating that what is most important is whether it is a good story (*yang penting, ceritanya bagus*). On the topic of '*sastra wangi*', they either vaguely recognise it as a phrase from the past or '*tidak pernah dengar*' (never heard of it!). Another telling development is that during 2012-13, four films have been released based on Dewi Lestari's writings: *Perahu Kertas* (Paper

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<sup>14</sup> In a comparative study, Soe Tjen Marching points out that while Ayu Utami's *Saman* provides a challenge to patriarchal values in Indonesia, Fira Basuki's *Jendela-jendela* does not show such a rebellion; Soe Tjen Marching, "The Representation of the Female Body in Two Contemporary Indonesian Novels: Ayu Utami's *Saman* and Fira Basuki's *Jendela-jendela*," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 35.102 (2007).

<sup>15</sup> See the special issue of *Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2007) for an extended discussion of the *sastra wangi* phenomenon.



*Boat*, 2012), *Perahu Kertas 2* (2013), *Retroverso* (2013) and *Madre* (2013). *Madre* is based on one of Dewi Lestari’s short stories, set in a bakery in Jakarta, and touches on issues of Chinese Indonesian identity. Meanwhile, *Retroverso* is based on a collection of short stories, each in turn based on a song. The *Perahu Kertas* films are drawn from a longer novel, which recounts an ongoing and frequently impeded love story between the young protagonists Kugy and Keenan, who struggle to balance societal and family expectations with their respective dreams of becoming a writer and artist.

In these stories, Dewi Lestari does not shy away from serious issues, or from desire and sexuality. Moreover, the *Perahu Kertas* films were directed by Hanung Bramantyo, who is well-known for choosing to film quite controversial stories.<sup>16</sup> However, the films have performed exceedingly well at the box office, and in contrast to the reception of the early ‘*sastra wang*’ novels, have provoked no public controversy. This is particularly interesting because –given its highly public visual nature– film is much more frequently subject to public debate, controversy and censorship, compared with novels, which can usually push boundaries further. Also, in Indonesia the audience bases for each media are quite different in scale; a vast many more people watch movies than read books, and therefore they are often seen as more influential, and potentially dangerous in spreading messages and ideas.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, a close, comparative study of novel-to-film adaptations can be useful in identifying what kinds of discourses are officially prescribed and proscribed in contemporary Indonesia. I propose that the production and successful release of a major feature film in many ways ‘legitimises’ the text it was drawn from, and in turn, the author who created the story. In this case, given the widespread acceptance and popular legitimacy of

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<sup>16</sup> Some of the more controversial of Hanung Bramantyo’s films include: *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (*Woman with a Turban*, 2009), a critical exploration of women’s treatment in the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) system; *Tanda Tanya* (*Question Mark*, 2011), which explores issues of religious intolerance versus pluralism; and *Cinta tapi Beda* (*Love but Different*, 2013), a love story about a couple from different religious backgrounds. These films all provoked public protests and heated media debate, and were eventually withdrawn from cinemas.

<sup>17</sup> For examples of recent films that have sparked controversy, see footnote 16 above. In contrast, novels in contemporary Indonesia very rarely invite such protest.

the aforementioned film adaptations, we can see that authors such as Dewi Lestari have well and truly shaken off the ‘*sastra wangi*’ discourse and attendant controversy of the previous decade.

#### **D. Increasingly Varied Images of ‘the Author’: Islamic Women’s Writing and the ‘Teen-lit’ Phenomenon**

It is clear that one decade on from the initial hype over *sastra wangi*, there is nowhere near the same level of moral panic about young female authors narrating their own stories. This is linked to a range of developments in the Indonesian mediascape over the past decade. The post-Suharto *Reformasi* period saw a systematic process of media deregulation; hundreds of independent media stations have emerged and a whole range of regulations and authorities have been challenged.<sup>18</sup> We have seen the emergence of various voices that were suppressed under Suharto, including those advocating regional autonomy, women’s rights, political Islam, and many others.<sup>19</sup> In terms of women’s narratives emerging during this time, besides the initial ‘*sastra wangi*’ authors, two key trends of importance here are ‘teenlit’ and Islamic women’s writing.

Since around 2003, young teenage authors have entered the Indonesian literary scape in a big way, with girls as young as 14 publishing bestsellers. Some of the forerunners of this genre were Rachmania Arunita, Maria Ardelia, Dyan Nuranindya and Esti Kinasih, who brought to the shelves novels exploring both the challenges and opportunities

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<sup>18</sup> Merlyna Lim, *@Crossroads: Democratization and Corporatization of Media in Indonesia* (Ford Foundation (Jakarta) and Participatory Media Lab (Arizona State University), 2011); Damien Kingsbury, *Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Indonesia’s Arduous Path to Reform, Strategy* (Australia: Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 2012); Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David T. Hill and Krishna Sen (eds.), *The Internet in Indonesia’s New Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> For regionalism, see Robin Bush, “Regional Sharia Regulations in Indonesia: Anomaly or Symptom?,” in Greg Fealy and S. White (eds.), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008); Maribeth Erb, Priyambudi Sulistiyanto, and Carole Faucher, *Regionalism in Post-Subarto Indonesia* (New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2005). For Islam, see Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

of everyday life for female adolescents in contemporary Indonesia.<sup>20</sup> Rachmania Arunita’s *Eifel I’m in Love* (2003) was soon adapted into a film version, as was Maria Ardelia’s *Me vs. high heels* (2004), further reinforcing the legitimacy of these young female authors. While of course a varied and complex genre in its own right, teen-lit generally shares with the so-called *sastra wangi* genre a focus on modern urban lifestyles, this time from an even younger perspective, challenging prevailing notions of age-based hierarchical authority.

Simultaneously, the rise of popular Islamic fiction, known variously as ‘*novel dakwah*’ (proselytizing novels) or ‘*sastra Islam*’ (Islamic literature), has opened another space for exploration of identity in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Despite its long marginalisation under the New Order regime, since the 1990s and then subsequently during the *reformasi* period, Islam has increasingly entered the public sphere, including the fields of popular culture and literature.<sup>21</sup> Though not as wildly popular and successful as their male counterparts, such as Habiburrahman El Shirazy, whose novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (*Verses of Love*, 2004) became an overnight bestseller, female Muslim writers such as Helvy Tiana Rosa, Asma Nadia, and Abidah El Khalieqy have reached a level of notable distinction among readers. Significantly, even though some of them were publishing their work around the same time as the so-called ‘*sastra wangi*’ authors, these female authors writing of their experiences as Islamic women were never included in the ‘fragrant literature’ category. This is even the case when

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<sup>20</sup> See Maya Sutedja-Liem, “Idealising the Tomboy: Representations of the Ideal Teenage Girl in Indonesian “Teen-lit,”” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 41.2 (2007).

<sup>21</sup> For the current rise of popular middle-class Islam in Indonesia, see: Noorhaidi Hasan, “The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere,” *Contemporary Islam*, 3 (2009); Greg Fealy, “Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia,” in Greg Fealy and Sally White (eds.), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008); Andrew N. Weintraub (ed.), *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* (New York: Routledge, 2011). For global comparisons of similar phenomena, see: Gary R. Blunt, *Imuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2009); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Local Contexts of Islamism in Popular Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).

the novels of Islamic authors contain sexually explicit scenes.<sup>22</sup> These kinds of labelling processes reveal complex layers of meaning associated with different categories of gender and religion when classifying literary trends. The rise of Islamic women's writing, coming closely on the heels of *sastra wangi* and teen-lit, has added yet another layer of complexity to what it means to be a female author in contemporary Indonesia.

A close examination of the '*sastra wangi*', 'teen-lit' and '*novel Islami*' trends highlights the ways in which increased freedom of speech and critical thinking in the past decade have had an impact on socio-religious issues and the literary-historical context in Indonesia. New spaces have opened for female voices, for Islamic voices, and for younger voices, and the novels produced in this context provide fascinating areas of study, revealing a much wider and more varied notion of 'the author' in contemporary Indonesia. These trends have disrupted previously prevailing ideas about both 'literature' itself, and about women's place in it, with notions of a male-dominated literary scene losing much of their credence. I would argue that this is a major factor in the decline of the '*sastra wangi*' label. It is no longer an exception for women to be narrating their own stories in Indonesia, and writing about topics other than being a good housewife; rather, it is increasingly the norm, with female authors outnumbering their male counterparts in many sections of bookstores, particularly in the youth fiction genre.

### **E. Dangerous Overlaps: Islamic Feminism in Popular Narratives**

However, just because the notion of female narration is no longer a source of such anxiety and debate in contemporary Indonesia, this certainly does not mean gender and sexuality are no longer contested. When Dewi Lestari's name arises in my focus groups, it is greeted with smiles all around, but some of her contemporaries remain more controversial, and it is useful to examine exactly what defines certain narratives as fit for popular consumption, and others as potentially dangerous.

In some cases, as I will explore in more detail in the next section, an emerging dichotomy of 'inspirational' versus 'critical' appears to be

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<sup>22</sup> See Tineke Hellwig, "Abidah El Khalieqy's Novels: Challenging Patriarchal Islam," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 167.1 (2011).

increasingly shaping the way consumers pass judgement on popular narratives. Furthermore it is obvious that certain overlaps create particular anxiety; for example, when explicitly ‘Islamic’ narratives take on issues of female sexuality and present Islamic feminist critiques of Islamic institutions. A useful example is the work of Abidah El Khalieqy, in particular her novel *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (*Woman with a Turban*, 2001), which was subsequently released as a film in 2009. Significantly, the film’s director, Hanung Bramantyo, also directed the Dewi Lestari adaptation *Perahu Kertas 1 & 2*, but public reactions to the two films were very different. Unlike the widely acclaimed and long-running *Perahu Kertas*, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* faced public protests instigated by radical group FPI (The Islamic Defenders’ Front) and was withdrawn from cinemas within two weeks, accused of presenting a false picture of life in an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*).

The protagonist of *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, Nisa, is the only daughter of the *kyai* (*pesantren* leader), and remains throughout the novel and film very devout and committed to her faith. However, she faces a variety of challenges, which lead her to critically question Islamic restrictions on women’s social and sexual behavior, male power over women, and polygamy. Although she is a bright student, her parents arrange for her to marry rather than pursuing further education. The marriage is not happy, and through Nisa’s story, both the novel and film explore taboo subjects such as domestic violence and marital rape. Eventually, Nisa is able to divorce her abusive and polygamous husband; study, and then find fulfilling work at a women’s legal representation organization; finally marry her true love and childhood sweetheart; give birth to a daughter; and set up a library at the *pesantren* to encourage young Muslim girls to further their education. The ending is bittersweet, perhaps revealing the author’s simultaneous hopes and fears for the future of Indonesian Islam – while Nisa successfully campaigns against some of the restrictions placed on girls at her *pesantren*, and even manages to change the minds of some of the more conservative hard-liners there, she tragically loses her beloved husband, and it is suggested he is killed by the jealous and vindictive ex-husband she had fought so hard to escape from.

The polarized reactions to this film, in comparison to *Perahu Kertas*, demonstrate the continued divisiveness of debates around women and

Islam in Indonesia. While the rise of popular Islamic expression has had many positive impacts, such as opening a space for Islamic women's writing and broadening ideas of authorship, some commentators have voiced concern over the increased power of hardline Islamic groups such as FPI to define appropriate female behaviour and expression.<sup>23</sup> A significant example of Islamic institutions' growing involvement in controlling popular culture was the public debate from 2006-2008 surrounding new anti-pornography legislation.<sup>24</sup> During the debate, many commentators pointed out that the period of creative and artistic freedom (which gave rise to so-called the '*sastra wangi*' phenomenon) following the fall of the Suharto regime has conversely also fuelled anxiety and calls for regulation, particularly of women's bodies.

Undoubtedly, Islam has become an increasingly important reference point in Indonesia during the past decade. However, media concerns over hard-line Islam groups increasingly defining parameters of contemporary narrative consumption must be tempered by everyday realities. For instance, my ethnographic findings point more towards other categories of judgement operating amongst a new generation of young Indonesian consumers.

## **F. New and Old Categories of Judgement: Motivational Versus Critical Narratives**

As I mentioned earlier, throughout my in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, none of the respondents expressed particular anxiety over female authors writing about their sexuality, or their ambitions beyond the home and family. For these young urban participants, the

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<sup>23</sup> Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, Pam Allen, "Women, Gendered Activism and Indonesia's Anti-Pornography Bill," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, 16 (2009).

<sup>24</sup> RUU APP passed in 2008, regulating behaviour as well as media content. This regulation strongly focusses on women's bodies, both in the media and in reality. The national RUU-APP legislation was passed in 2008, with minor amendments, and ultimately, the new laws call into question the very definition of media, by blurring the lines between where a representation ends and where a social act begins; Allen, "Women, Gendered Activism and Indonesia's Anti-Pornography Bill.," Jennifer Lindsay, "Media and Morality: Pornography Post Suharto," in Krishna Sen and David T. Hill (eds.), *Politics and the Media in Twenty-First Century Indonesia: Decade of Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

figure of the strong modern Muslim woman telling her own story is a very real one; their Indonesia is full of such women. They run for political positions, obtain doctoral degrees, travel abroad, marry for love and so on. These behaviours are certainly not seen as incompatible with contemporary Indonesian identity, in the way that they were often incompatible with the New Order's '*Ibuisme*' housewife ideology.

Rather, what comes out very strongly in my interviews is a dichotomy of positive and inspirational narrative approaches on the one hand, and critical narrative approaches on the other. These different approaches are a key factor in determining the way young consumers pass judgement on popular narratives. As I will outline below, this striking binary at work between '*beral*', '*berkritik*' (heavy, critical) narratives and '*positif*', '*motivasi*' (positive, motivational) narratives can help explain why, for example, in recent years Dewi Lestari's narratives have been so widely popular and easily adapted and marketed as films, compared with the work of her '*sastra wangi*' contemporaries such as Ayu Utami or Islamic feminist Abidah El Khalieqy. In many ways, the manner in which my young respondents talk about Indonesian film and literature echoes long-prevailing official discourses on the role of art as a tool to advance the nation; within this perspective, there is apparently little room for negative or critical portrayals.

When discussing the merits of various novels and films, my participants will frequently express their views about the perceived social responsibility of popular narratives:

The most important things are education, motivation... and positive messages (Yogyakarta, male, 23 y.o. 20/04/13).

Good quality stories must always have good meanings... Educational for children, inspirational, and not too predictable (Makassar, female, 20 y.o. 10/06/13).

Films should be educative... there should be values like honesty, hard work, love, and care for others (Padang, male, 20 y.o. 03/05/13).

I prefer stories that raise us up, that are inspirational and motivational... that portray everyday life and the struggles of ordinary people (Makassar, female, 18 y.o. 11/06/13).

If a film wants to be considered quality, it must have meaning and give



lessons, especially about reaching our ambitions... it must also be realistic and not over-the-top (Jakarta, male, 24 y.o. 16/04/13).

From good narratives, we can gain positive messages, such as loving our homeland, the importance of educating young children, and chasing our dreams (Banjarmasin, female, 21 y.o. 10/09/13).

*Movies* are not just for *entertainment*, but can give positive messages. *It can change people* [English in original] (Malang, female, 25 y.o. 17/03/13).

Such sentiments are related to a number of different elements at work in contemporary Indonesia. Firstly, the current boom in self-help literature and motivational seminars strongly pushes this notion that one can indeed transform one's life through reading and listening to motivational material. Secondly, these kinds of comments also reflect widespread uncertainty and pessimism with current political situations and persisting corruption issues.<sup>25</sup> The following remark, for example, expands upon how popular narratives can play a role in overcoming Indonesia's perceived shortcomings:

Every day in the news we hear about corruption, about violence. In this context, it's very important that film and literature portray images that are more positive, more idealistic, so we ourselves can always think positively and also be motivated to make our society better (Yogyakarta, female, 21 y.o. 23/05/13).

Dewi Lestari's *Perahu Kertas* novel and the subsequent film version are considered to fulfil this social responsibility of 'thinking positive', with many respondents pointing out that the main characters' struggles to achieve their ambitions is what draws them to the story:

In *Perahu Kertas*, the main character likes to dream. I'm interested [in the story] because the young couple in this story pursue their dreams (Banjarmasin, female, 20 y.o. 09/09/13).

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<sup>25</sup> There is even, despite Suharto's record of corruption, collusion and state sponsored violence, an increasing nostalgia for the pre-1998 era, and 'strong leadership' in Indonesia. In a poll conducted in May 2012 by the leading Indonesian broadsheet, *Kompas*, 54 percent of those surveyed felt that the state of the country's politics was as bad as or worse than before the events of 1998; 64 percent felt that corruption and law enforcement had not improved; and as many as 69 percent felt that the state of the Indonesian economy was no better than before Suharto's downfall; Zakir Hussain, "Suharto's Gone, but Many in Indonesia Yearn for Him," *The Jakarta Globe*, 2012.

In contrast, the novels of Ayu Utami, for example, or the film adaptation of *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* are described as ‘heavy’ (berat) and more ‘political’ than the work of other female novelists. Particularly respondents more versed in cultural and literary studies, such as students of FIB (Cultural Sciences Faculty) at various universities, make clear distinctions between ‘critical’ (*berkritik*), ‘didactic’ (*bertendensi*) political literature on the one hand and the more ‘universal humanism’ (*humanisme*) of ‘less political’ narratives. Ayu Utami, along with Islamic feminist author Abidah El Khalieqy and controversial filmmaker Hanung Bramantyo are described as ‘having a political agenda’ (*punya niat politik*) and being more focused on ‘deconstruction’ (*dekonstruksi*) rather than simply ‘reconstruction’ (*rekonstruksi*). This seems to imply that other popular narratives, which are more supportive of the status quo, are completely apolitical. Such remarks echo much older discourses in Indonesia, and bring us to a third major factor influencing how people engage with popular narratives: the persistence and resilience of New Order era ways of judging art, film and literature in Indonesia.

Through official discourses such as ‘national cinema’ and ‘national literature’ (*film nasional, sastra nasional*), the New Order regime idealized artistic practice as a tool for advancing and educating the nation.<sup>26</sup> While insisting film and literature should be apolitical, the government nevertheless used such media to advance their own political propaganda.<sup>27</sup> Any kind of critical perspective would struggle to pass the censorship board, and would be frequently dismissed on the grounds of ‘SARA’ a policy outlawing any potentially critical portrayals of relations between ‘tribes, religions, races or groups’.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the young respondents participating in my study have grown up during the *reformasi* period, yet many of the tropes that dominated film and literary criticism during the New Order era still emerge frequently in their discussions. When reflecting on what makes certain narratives controversial, my respondents explain that it is any kind of ‘critical’ portrayals of ‘*agama*’ (religion), ‘*adat-istiadat*’ (local customs) dan ‘*bangsa*’ (the nation) that provoke public protest:

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Barker, “A Cultural Economy of the Contemporary Indonesian Film Industry,” *PhD Thesis*, National University of Singapore, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order*.

<sup>28</sup> van Heeren, “Contemporary Indonesian Film.”

Popular stories usually represent an idealized reality. Controversial stories tend to critique Indonesia or Islam (Makassar, male, 21 y.o. 10/6/13).

Thus, narratives that challenge the status quo or critique current realities (including gender-based critiques) continue to face backlash in contemporary Indonesia. However, I would suggest that the status quo itself is a much more ephemeral and shifting concept than it was during the New Order regime, and involves a range of intersecting power relations and multiple centres of power. Ultimately, and significantly for this article's focus on changing attitudes towards female authors, my interview results suggest that gendered aspects of narratives no longer seem to define their level of acceptance; rather it is other criteria, more related to the social responsibility of art and the popularity of 'motivational' materials, that impact the way young Indonesian consumers judge these narratives.

## G. Conclusion

A powerful media trope for many years, the '*sastra wangi*' category has been lost in the contemporary Indonesian mediascape, where notions of authorship and who has the authority to create narratives have become far more varied and plural. The emergence of popular Islamic fiction, and of literature written by and for teenagers, have both contributed to this plurality.

One decade on from the initial *sastra wangi* hype, it is generally no longer a source of anxiety for women to be voicing their own stories, and the New Order's hegemonic good wife and mother image has arguably been replaced by contested female forms, reflecting current struggles for power between conservative and progressive forces in the political and social realms.<sup>29</sup> This contestation is apparent in contemporary controversies over Islamic feminist critiques such as *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, and ongoing debates over what constitutes 'pornography'.

Yet although some Islamic institutions are becoming increasingly active in prescribing and proscribing the content of popular narratives, my ethnographic findings indicate that the most powerful judgment criteria for young Indonesians are linked not to religious influences, but rather to a broader discourse of 'positive' versus 'negative' or 'inspirational'

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<sup>29</sup> Hatley, *Javanese Performances on an Indonesian Stage*.

versus ‘critical’ approaches to representing contemporary realities. The vast majority of responses continue to strongly echo official New Order era discourses, and this ongoing persistence warrants further investigation elsewhere.

This study demonstrates that popular novels and films in contemporary Indonesia are rich sources of political and cultural analysis; moreover, the ensuing debates in the media, blogs and TV interviews over the authenticity and validity of particular narratives shed light on the entertainment media’s role as a ‘cultural space’ in which different notions of Indonesian identity are contested and negotiated. Social truths or realities are not stable, but are constantly defined and re-defined in competing discourses, and as Fairclough argues, ‘changes in society and culture manifest themselves in all their tentativeness, incompleteness and contradictory nature in the heterogeneous and discursive shifting practices of the media.’<sup>30</sup> The contemporary conjuncture in Indonesia is highly complex, and can no longer be summed up in terms of authority and resistance or in terms of hegemonic gender constructions; instead we must continue to examine the intersections between various sites of power contestation including gender, class, religion, politics and region, to trace where exactly tensions and anxieties arise, and how such tensions continue to shape and be shaped by contemporary Indonesian subjectivities.

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<sup>30</sup> Fairclough, *Media Discourse*. See also Debra Spitulnik, “The Social Circulation of Media Discourse and the Mediation of Communities,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 6.2 (1997).

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